



The indestructible medium



People have predicted the demise of the print catalogue for years, but its ease of use and tactile nature continues to give brands a valuable platform for inspiring customers and prompting purchase. Just ask P&O, Boden, IKEA, Firebox, Argos...

BY SIMON CREASEY

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HEN JC PENNEY announced in 2009 that it was culling its iconic 'big book' catalogue and phasing out distribution of 70

smaller catalogues in 2010, many people feared it was the death knell for the medium.

The famous American department store had printed a catalogue since the 1960s and it was seen as being part of the chain's DNA. However, earlier this year, JC Penney stated that it was doing a volte-face. From March, the retailer announced that it was reinstating its catalogue after data showed that many of its online sales were prompted by what its customers saw in print.

It should have learnt from clothing retailer Lands' End's misstep back in 2000. The company stopped mailing catalogues to a group of its best customers to see what would happen. The move backfired as its best customers simply stopped ordering, costing the company \$6m in lost sales.

Over the past few decades it's fair to say that the humble product catalogue has undergone a rough ride. Run lengths have shortened and catalogues are being sent out less frequently as retailers have the ability to put their entire back catalogue of products online for a fraction of the cost. However, at the same time retailers are making better use of customer data to produce more targeted catalogue mailings and are increasingly using catalogues as part of their wider omni-channel strategies.

That's because printed catalogues work.

Picture perfect
(Right) Clothing retailer Boden uses a series of high-quality images in their catalogues

What JC Penney failed to understand is that for many customers the catalogue is part of their experience of the brand. As Mike Gough, Associate Director of Creative Services, Production, at Boden, explains: "The catalogue is part of our brand heritage and we really value the tactile experience it gives our customers. We know it's a powerful tool and is particularly loved by our best customers who really engage with it."

The traveller's companion

But don't just take Gough's word for it. According to research by management consulting firm Kurt Salmon, 58% of online shoppers browse printed catalogues for ideas and 31% have a retailer's catalogue with them when they make an online order.

For some industry sectors, the catalogue is arguably more crucial than other media. Take travel, for example. Travel agencies could easily get away with placing their holiday packages online where they can use larger images and even video content to bring their resorts to life, yet the agencies still value these 'brochures' and print them in their thousands every year. That's because they "still play a massive part in our passenger booking journey," according to a spokeswoman from P&O.

"We currently mail around a quarter of a million passengers our first edition brochure, which features the new programme available to book," she adds. "This represents a huge spike in bookings. Whether passengers subsequently book



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via phone, online or via travel agents, the brochure is still very much used by passengers to choose their holidays."

Like P&O, many of the companies that continue to use catalogues do so because of the high engagement levels the printed page generates versus the level of interaction when consumers surf the internet for products.

"Looking at online behaviour, time on site is relatively short and the number of pages visited is limited," says Barney Byfield, Managing Director at packaging manufacturer Davpack, which has been printing product catalogues since the late-1990s. "Therefore the customer's knowledge of our range is often limited. With the UK's biggest in-stock choice of packaging, offered with attractive discounts, it's important to Davpack to get these USPs over to customers. The catalogue does this well and gives us a permanent presence in the office."

A continual presence

The benefits Byfield details is why a growing army of companies are being drawn down the catalogue route. In the last decade, a number of companies have broken into the catalogue market for the first time. In the UK, the supermarket groups have particularly embraced the model to advertise their growing general merchandise ranges and even online-only operators such as Firebox rely on print catalogues to drive sales.

One company about to join this group by launching its first ever catalogue is Bizzi Growin, which designs and supplies soft nursery furnishing for newborns and babies to high street brands such as Mothercare,

CATALOGUE MODELS FOUR OF EUROPE'S BIGGEST CATALOGUE USERS



IKEA

The poster company for the catalogue industry, IKEA has been printing catalogues since 1951 and shows no signs of slowing down. It currently distributes over 217,000,000 copies of its 300-page catalogue around the world every year.



Top Toy

Swedish toy retailer Top Toy, which holds the franchise for Toys R Us in the country and regularly prints catalogues, caused a stir two years ago when it published a Christmas catalogue that challenged gender stereotyping, featuring images of boys playing with vacuum cleaners and girls firing guns.



Argos

In 2013, Argos added augmented reality (AR) functionality to its catalogues when it trialled a 'Blippable' issue. Throughout the catalogue, users could use the Blippar app to access additional product information and view videos.



Carhartt

Although many fashion brands are increasingly using online channels to reach out to consumers, one brand bucking the trend is contemporary workwear outfit Carhartt. Never one to conform, the company produces a 'must-have' pocket sized 'lookbook' aimed at the cool crowd to showcase its offerings for each new season.

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Kurt Salmon, 2014

Tesco and Babies R Us.

"We will start by printing for our buyers at Mothercare, Tesco and John Lewis, as well as independent retailers," says Cathy Bolton, head of sales at Bizzi Growin. "We then plan to branch out into catalogues for the consumer and this will be a much higher volume."

Bolton says that the catalogue is a vital part of the growth plans for Bizzi Growin, as its target audience are parents and grandparents who still love to read magazines and catalogues.

"Catalogues are easier and more user-friendly than online," explains Bolton. "Plus it's something that people keep and always have around, whether that's on a desk at work or on a coffee table at home. A catalogue ensures that your company, brand and products stay at the forefront of the customer's mind."

Flicking towards the future

It's vitally important that growing retailers such as Bizzi Growin and established operators such as Boden find what Gough describes as the right blend of "relevant printed material to excite and engage the customer whilst complementing the digital experience". Boden has already used technology to enhance the print experience.

"We are currently looking at ways of using online data to create and deliver faster, reactive and more relevant print," explains Gough. "Last year we ran a Mini Boden 'Create Your Own Cover' campaign using an online platform which enabled our customers to create their own personalised cover for the catalogue. We are looking at other ways to use the same platform in the future."

Recognising that the future of retail is omni-channel, home furnishings giant IKEA – probably the largest catalogue user in the world – has developed an app that works in tandem with the catalogue to give users extended digital content, including home furnishing tips and ideas, videos, 360-degree views of rooms and the ability to place selected 3D images of IKEA products in customers' own homes.

Considering recent developments and forays into the digital world from the offline world of print, it appears that rather than kill off the catalogue entirely, these online channels will increasingly feed and complement the printed page, thus ensuring the catalogue will be around for many years to come.